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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HELSINKI 000484

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SUBJECT: FINLAND: PRIME MINISTER HOLDS FIRST RUSSIA FORUM

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Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Scott Brandon for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Following up on the government's "Russia Action Policy" issued earlier this year, on November 26 Prime Minister Vanhanen held the first "Russia Forum." According to the Action Plan, the PM should hold a Forum to connect Finns from government, business and academia in order to inject new thinking into Finland's Russia policy. Vanhanen brought together over 200 Finns to discuss the Russian economy and examine the quality of Finland's Russian expertise. Foreign Minister Stubb (who spearheaded creation of the Action Plan) offered a broad assessment of Russia and its foreign relations, praising the U.S. "re-set" and calling the EU Russia's "best partner." The event received praise for bringing so many together to discuss their eastern neighbor, but also some criticism for a lack of substance. However, the event seems to have connected Finns who might not otherwise have met, and gotten them discussing their eastern neighbor, so the Forum seems to hold some promise of future substance. END SUMMARY.

Public-private assessment of evolving policy

¶2. (U) On November 26 Prime Minister Vanhanen hosted Finland's first "Russia Forum." The Government's (GOF) "Russia Action Plan" published earlier this year (REFTEL) states that the PM will occasionally organize an event to promote a public-private partnership, in order to bring new thinking to an evolving Russia policy. The Plan, which provides guidelines on how to deal with a resurgent Russia, largely reflects Foreign Minister Stubb's thinking; it seeks a more clear-eyed approach than followed in the past by pursuing productive relations with their eastern neighbor without shying from Russia's shortcomings and challenges.

Vanhelan: Finland is the EU's gateway to Russia

¶3. (SBU) In a December 2 meeting with PolChief, Maimo Henriksson, Director of the Foreign Ministry's (MFA) Russia Unit discussed the Forum. Henriksson said The Forum brought together over two hundred Finns from government, business, academia and politics. It focused on the broad themes of the Russian economy and Finnish expertise in Russian matters. Vanhanen, Stubb and other ministers provided remarks. In his remarks Vanhanen linked the event's two themes, stating that in order to best take advantage of its position as the EU's gateway to Russia, Finland needed to promote greater knowledge of Russia and more Finnish-Russian connections.

Stubb: EU is Russia's "best partner"

¶4. (C) Henriksson provide Pol/Econ chief Stubb's talking

points for his speech, from which she said he drew extensively in his remarks. Stubb broadly covered Russia's economy, domestic politics, and foreign relations. He listed familiar problems: a lack of transparency, corruption, an economy based on natural resources, and a democratic deficit.

While Stubb noted favorably comments by President Medvedev about the need for Russia to modernize, he wrote that in the short term he did not see any profound changes to take place in Russia.

¶15. (U) Stubb praised the U.S. "re-set policy", stating that it was well-received in Russia. He added that while the two countries continue to address persistent problems, both wish to work on matters of common interests like Afghanistan, non-proliferation and the Middle East. He also welcomed signs of improvement in Russia-NATO relations.

¶16. (U) However, Stubb most strongly emphasized the importance of the EU, calling it "the best partner" for Russia. According to Stubb, the EU offers a partnership that focuses on cooperation, diminishing trade barriers, improving mobility of people and increasing regional stability. Whenever Russia undergoes a modernization process, Stubb stressed that the EU would possess strong potential and that Finland could play a key role as a neighbor and EU Member State.

Finns less interested in studying Russia

¶17. (SBU) Henriksson said the participants took a hard look at the state of Finland's expertise on Russia. The most glaring

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problem is Finns' Russian language skills: apparently approximately only one in forty-five Finns speaks Russian, a number that includes the Russian-speaking minority in Finland. Another problem is the dwindling number of Finns studying in Russia, due to the ease in studying within the EU and bureaucratic difficulties in living and studying in Russia. Participants proposed a number of ideas, like holding "Russian knowledge fairs" and perhaps establishing some form of Finnish-Russian university.

GOF to act on Forum's guidance

¶18. (SBU) Henriksson voiced considerable satisfaction with the event (perhaps not surprisingly, as she was one of the organizers). She pointed to significant public and private sector attendance and to the active participation of Stubb, who moderated the various panel discussions. Asked about action items flowing from the Forum, Henriksson said that it fell to the relevant ministries to note suggestions and pursue proposals - for example, the Ministry of Education would consider how to increase interest in Russian studies. Henriksson expected another Forum next year, likely one smaller and tighter in focus.

¶19. (SBU) In a separate meeting with Pol/Econ staff, Hanna Smith, a researcher at the University of Helsinki who participated in the Forum, offered less praise than Henriksson. Smith (and others, she asserted) thought the content too broad and shallow to call it a great success. She saw no concrete "action items" emerging from the event, and wondered whether holding it once a year would serve a useful purpose. However, Smith allowed that it was the first such event, and that future events could hold more substance.

She also noted that the Forum promoted contacts and discussion among participants who might not otherwise have met, and who will continue to meet outside the Forum.

¶10. (SBU) COMMENT: Stubb has been active in forging an Finnish approach to Russia that is more open than in the past. He seems to have succeeded in advancing this idea, given the turnout and high-level participation in the Forum.

He even managed to slide in some public criticism of Russia, a very unusual thing here, given the MFA's account of the Forum on its website, the grim picture it painted of the economy and the expectation that membership in the WTO would not improve the economic situation there. END COMMENT.

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